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BOOKS AND ARTS

The Casey case

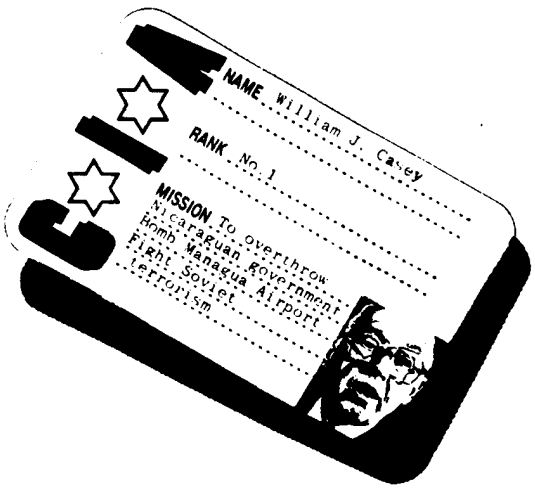
VEIL: THE SECRET WARS OF THE CIA 1981-1987. By Bob Woodward. *Simon & Schuster. 543 pages. $21.95 and £14.95*

"HE WAS off with his boys to plan a war". Thus Mr Bob Woodward on Bill Casey and his CIA boys, off on a whirlwind trip to Central America, determined to lure the contra guerrillas down from the mountains, into the cities and into the business of overthrowing the Nicaraguan government (though that was forbidden by the American Congress). On its way home, the CIA show dropped in on El Salvador where Casey sternly suggested to the head of the dreaded "Treasury police" that he should pull his men out of the death-squads (it was 1983) or he might lose his $90,000 salary from the CIA. Casey's urgings, writes Mr Woodward, were pragmatic, untainted by sentiment about human rights.

Mr Woodward is one of the two *Washington Post* reporters who uncovered the Watergate scandal, and his stardom is reflected in his outsize name on the dust-jacket. Gathering information for his book on Casey's CIA ("Veil" was the code word for such covert goings-on as last year's disinformation campaign against Libya), he talked to more than 250 people, including Casey himself: the director, who died earlier this year, always returned the journalist's calls.

The result is an investigative reporter's book, spinning along with insight, first-class gossip, reconstructed conversations (expletives undeleted) and a fair few scoops. Mr Woodward is the first to say that it should not be read as history. Yet its cumulative effect is to provide, for the first time, a chilling glimpse into what happens when a buccaneer takes over America's intelligence agency.

Mr Woodward's determination not to be boring is sometimes a little bothersome: the reader is told that it is 11.40am, Thursday, on a beautiful sunny fall day, but it is a struggle to find the year. A more serious mistake is also born of Mr Woodward's green-eyeshade instincts. The Iran-contra affair broke while he was writing and the scandal was, indeed, the logical conclusion to his long tale of law-bending unaccountable action. He has not got very much to add to the affair, but he ends his book on the melodramatic note of a dying Casey apparently nodding his head when asked whether he knew about the diversion of funds from the Iranian arms-sale to the Nicaraguan contras.



The nod was ambiguous and, in any event, did not matter much: most people in the know assume that Casey, whom Mr Woodward has since described as "always deceiving, lying, breaking the rules and laws", was perfectly well aware of what Lieut-Col Oliver North was up to. But the account has caused a furore, with Casey's widow and others maintaining that the author could not have got into the hospital room. This has, probably unfairly, cast doubt on Mr Woodward's credibility; it has also distracted attention from far better bits of the book.

Examples: his account of the frustration, and sometimes feebleness, with which the congressional intelligence committees tried to keep up with what was going on in Nicaragua. Senators William Cohen and Gary Hart nearly blown up in a CIA-controlled operation to bomb Managua airport. Mr Dewey Clarridge who, after winning the director's heart with a slap-up dinner in Paris, became Casey's top Latin American man, speaking of plans to split Nicaragua into an east and west side, like New York or Beirut. Right-wing hoopla about a book by Mrs Claire Sterling on purported Soviet terrorism and the pooh-poohing of CIA intelligence reports that said there was no such thing. Operational details that, perhaps, should not have been revealed; many stories of spies.

The old spymaster himself is always at centre-stage. Mr Woodward describes the tall shambling man with his churning body language, a few strands of white hair, his wrinkles losing themselves in his jowls, slurring his words ("his speech was like a shortwave broadcast, fading in and out"). Pugnacious and profane, he went after what he wanted, ignoring Congress, the State Department and faint-hearts in his own agency.

Casey invited the author to a lamb-chop dinner, gave him rides in his aeroplane. Mr Woodward describes a ride when the director, stuffing peanuts into his mouth, spoke impatiently of the White House ("can't do two things at once") and of Mr Reagan's laziness. Casey was the man to do those things that the president, in a vague sort of way, wanted done. And why did an obsessively secretive man see the reporter so often and tell him so much? Mr Woodward supposes that Casey, an amateur historian and always a manipulator, wanted to shape the story.

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